

# THE AMERICAN ALLIGATOR



## THERMOREGULATION

Alligators are ectothermic -- they rely on external sources of heat to regulate their body temperature. Alligators control their body temperature by basking in the sun, or moving to areas with warmer or cooler air or water temperatures. Alligators are most active when temperatures are between 82° to 92° F (28° to 33° C). They stop feeding when the ambient temperature drops below approximately 70° F and they become dormant below 55° F. Alligators are dormant throughout much of the winter season. During this time, they can be found in burrows (or "dens") that they construct adjacent to an alligator hole or open water, but they occasionally emerge to bask in the sun during spells of warm weather.

## MORTALITY

**Eggs:** Alligator eggs are susceptible to drowning, being crushed by the female, predation, and other less common calamities. Raccoons are the primary predator, although hogs, and otters have been reported to depredate nests.



**Juveniles:** Small alligators are eaten by a variety of predators including raccoons, otters, wading birds, and fish; however, larger alligators may be their most significant predator.

**Adults:** Cannibalism, territorial fighting, and hunting by humans are probably the most significant mortality factors.

## THE POND

Deep water of the pond provides adequate food for the young gators, as well as a variety of other animals, especially in times of drought. The young gators stick together for the first year or two in small groups called "pods". The alligator "hole" is an ideal location to watch the lifecycles of alligators throughout the year.

## SURVIVAL

The average alligator clutch size is 35. From this, an estimated 15 live hatchlings will emerge. Only 6 alligator hatchlings will live to one year. Of these yearlings, 5 will become subadults (reach 4 feet in length). The number of subadults that reach maturity (6 feet in length) is approximately 4. These estimates are for a growing alligator population. As an alligator population matures (and has a higher percentage of large animals), the survival rate would be expected to be lower, in part due to a higher rate of cannibalism.



## EYE-SHINE

The tell-tale eye-shine of an alligator is caused by a layer of cells called the *tapetum lucidum*. This structure is located beneath the photoreceptor cells in the retina and reflects light back into these cells to increase the amount of light detected, improving an alligator's vision in low light conditions. In alligators this eye-shine is red.



## OTHER FUN FACTS

- Alligators in the wild are believed to live 35 - 50 years. In captivity their life span may be 60-80 years.
- The American alligator is the largest reptile in North America.
- The leather of the alligator was used by native Americans to make all types of leather items, even musical instruments such as drums.
- As of May 2006, there have been 19 confirmed fatalities caused by alligators in the State of Florida since records began in 1948.

A PAMPHLET TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC REGARDING THE PLIGHT OF THE AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

## OBSERVE SAFETY RULES

- Stay alert
- View alligators from a safe distance
- Stay on the trail
- Keep pets on a leash
- Do not feed or molest
- Keep young children close

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## REPRODUCTION

Nearly all alligators become sexually mature by the time they reach approximately 7 feet in length although females can reach maturity at 6 feet. A female may require 10-15 years and a male 8-12 years to reach these lengths. Courtship begins in early April, and mating occurs in May or June. Females build a mound nest of soil, vegetation, or debris; and deposit an average of 32 to 46 eggs in late June or early July. Mounds are 2 to 3 feet tall, usually 10-15 feet from the water. Incubation requires approximately 60-65 days, and hatching occurs in late August or early September.



Temperature of the incubating nest determines whether male or female alligators are created. Eggs that incubate between 90 and 93 degrees become males, while those incubating be-

tween 82 and 86 degrees become females. From 87 degrees and 89 degrees, the ratio of males to females is about equal.

## FOOD HABITS

Alligators are opportunistic feeders. Their diets include prey species that are abundant and easily accessible. Juvenile alligators eat primarily insects, amphibians, small fish, and other invertebrates. Adult alligators eat rough fish, snakes, turtles, small mammals, and birds.



Alligators are nocturnal and feed primarily at night. They swallow their prey whole. Their conical teeth are used for catching the prey, not tearing it apart. Alligators have about 80 teeth; when they are lost they regrow.

Alligators have a specialized valve in their throat called a gottis that enables the gator to capture its prey underwater. However, in order to swallow its food and thus keep itself from drowning, an alligator must lift its head out of the water.



## SIZE

Female alligators rarely exceed 9 feet in length, but males can grow much larger. The Florida state record for length is a 14 foot 5/8 inch male from Lake Monroe in Seminole County.

## EL LAGARTO

The name *alligator* is an anglicized form of the Spanish *e/ agarto* ("the lizard"), the name by which early Spanish explorers and settlers in Florida called the alligator.



## CAUTION

This trail traverses portions of alligator habitat. For your safety, observe the following:

### SAFETY RULES

- **STAY ALERT** Alligators can run up to 30 mph for short distances.
- **VIEW ALLIGATORS FROM A SAFE DISTANCE** All animals are wild and should be treated with respect at all times.
- **STAY ON THE TRAIL** Alligators are usually associated near water, but may travel between waterbodies. To minimize conflicts, stay on the trail.

### PLEASE KEEP PETS ON A LEASH

Due to the alligators unique teeth configuration, they prefer to eat small meals that can be swallowed readily.

• **DO NOT FEED OR MOLEST** It is a violation of Florida state law to feed any alligator. When people feed alligators, they lose their fear of humans.

- **STAY SAFE** Keep young children nearby. On average, an adult alligator can run 3x faster than an adult human. 5x faster than a child.